

## Christ's Church and the Apostles (30-100 CE)

### *Letter to the Galatians*

Readings: *Galatians 1:1-6:18*

#### ***Reflections:***

- Letter to the Galatians: Scholars are uncertain when Paul wrote Galatians but all are agreed that Paul is the author. This is a circular letter that Paul wrote to provide corrective teaching to the churches in Galatia. This letter no doubt was widely circulated among the churches Paul established. Many scholars believe this letter was written while Paul was in Antioch after his first missionary journey around 50 CE. His focus in this letter fits well with the events of his first missionary journey as Paul responds to questions about those who promote adhering to the Torah and to circumcision as a part of following Christ. Galatians clearly outlines the irreligious nature of the Good News and the contrast between an inside-out transformation through the Spirit versus an outside in attempt to manage our lives through the Law. Paul introduces a concept that he will develop within his understanding of our humanity. It is the contrast between living for the "flesh" and living in the Spirit. Galatians also provides Paul's personal recounting of his conversion from a religious fanatic to an irreligious revolutionary. Galatians is one of the greatest gifts to the church as it validates the testimony of one of the key people who witnessed the resurrected Christ and as well confirms the historicity of the book of Acts.
- Salutation: Here in his opening we have immediate evidence of how central the resurrection of Jesus is to the first Christian community and how firmly they taught Jesus as the savior of humanity. Virtually all aspects of early Christian belief are referenced in these few lines.
- Perversion of the Gospel: Paul makes it clear that it is possible to be deceived to believe a false gospel. It is interesting he references that even if an angel from heaven appears and tells you something different than what he writes here we should not believe it. Both Muslims and Mormons received their revelations from an angel and their message is vastly different from Paul's message. Paul is very passionate that anyone who preaches a false message is in big trouble!
- Gospel's divine origin: One of the themes of Scripture over and over is pleasing God rather than people. We are called to worship and obey God alone without fear of what others will think, do or say. Paul makes it clear that what he received he received directly from Jesus. This is important because Paul was never a disciple of Jesus and apparently had no contact with the pre-resurrected Jesus. Second, he is claiming the status of an apostle right

alongside of Peter and John. James, the half brother of Jesus, will also be viewed as an apostle because he met the resurrected Jesus as well even though he rejected Jesus prior to the resurrection. See 1 Corinthians 15 for an outlining of the various resurrection appearances including to Peter, Paul and James. In this passage Paul refers to himself as a servant of Christ, literally translated “bondservant” or “slave.” The image is of a free person selling themselves into slavery to another person.

- Teaching divine revealed: Here Paul shares his own version of the Damascus road appearance. “...God who set me apart from birth and called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles...” This verse is packed with insight about how Paul viewed God’s work in his life. The vision Paul had led to Christ being revealed to his heart and mind. We see again the internalized nature of Paul’s experience. We also see that it is grace based, stretches back to his birth, and is clearly the result of God’s purposes for his life. For Paul, God is firmly in control of everything and he is simply God’s servant. This confidence we will see over and over again in Paul in the story of Acts and his other writings.
- Doctrine not from Apostles: Paul outlines a bit of his life story here to emphasize that he received his understanding apart from any of the other apostles. He was with Peter and James but only for two weeks.
- Gentile evangelism accepted: We see again Paul’s own recounting of what Luke records. Paul gives a few more details. We see the importance of Paul being led by the Spirit to return to Jerusalem. He also outlines how clearly he was supported by the other apostles. He has to restate one of the key truths, “God does not judge by appearances,” because he definitely was breaking the mold of what an apostle was supposed to be. Rather than being a disciple of Jesus, he was a Pharisee that had killed Christians. Paul makes it clear that there is unity among the apostles that he and Barnabas go to the Gentiles (the whole known world) while the other apostles would go to the Jews (Israel). Paul’s faith is incredible. “You guys take on Israel, the country Jesus has already reached out to for three years and Barnabas and I will take on the world.” James, Peter and John are all mentioned here showing the status of these three apostles as being the key leaders of the Jesus movement. Paul ends with a key statement that all Christian leaders must face and embrace: “All they asked was that we should continue to remember the poor, the very thing I am eager to do.” All outreach must embrace serving those in need.
- Paul rebuked Peter: We see that Peter must have slid back because of pressure. God had already spoken to Peter through a vision but apparently it didn’t stick emotionally. This is not uncommon. God can show us things and then over time due to other people around us we lose sight of what God has spoken to us and we fall back to our old ways or old way of thinking. Peter seems to struggle with this consistently and serves as a good reminder to hold tight to whatever God shows you. Paul speaks the truth in love to him. He is direct and calls Peter back to the truth and freedom in Christ.

- **Law and Christ:** Paul now zeros in on the question of can a person be found righteous (justified) in God's eyes through the Law? The answer is a resounding no! Paul makes it clear that having a completely right standing before God (being righteous or justified or "just if I'd never sinned") is given as a grace gift from God because of trusting or having faith in Christ and his death for us. Paul quickly jumps to another question because it is the one that comes immediately to mind for religious people: If there are no rules, won't people start to sin more? As Paul puts it, "If while I am seeking to be justified by Christ it becomes apparent I am still sinning, does that mean I am off the hook for that sin and Christ in fact is promoting sin?" The answer again is no. We see here how Paul is so clear about the inside out approach to life transformation. "I died to the Law (it has no power over me to judge me or dictate my life). I have been crucified with Christ (my life is now in Christ) and I no longer live (my old independent "decide for myself what is right and wrong" way of living) but Christ lives in me (through the Spirit)." To fully embrace grace you must reject the Law. To fully depend on the Spirit and the love God has for you, you must step free of the Law.
- **Law and Faith:** Paul is wondering who put a spell on them to send them back to religion rather than live in the power, love and freedom of the Spirit. Paul makes it clear that simply through faith these Christ-followers were filled with the Spirit and yet they are tempted to return to a law-based approach to life and community. Paul makes it clear that Jesus didn't come to give us the power to be fully religious but to live fully free of religion. He came to anchor our lives and relationships in his love and through a trust based relationship teach us how to live in that other-centered freedom. We also see that miracles are a normal part of Spirit-filled community. They may not be as dramatic as what we see within the life of Jesus but we should anticipate that God's power will be revealed in a Spirit-empowered community. When God is around he just likes to do that stuff.
- **Abraham's faith:** Paul makes the simple connection. Abraham the father and founder of God's big happy family had no law and began only with a trust based relationship (See Genesis 15:6, 12:3, 18:18, 22:18). He was the one promised to be a blessing to all the nations of the world. It makes sense that the blessing that would come to planet earth would come the same way: a trust based relationship with God. That was how it all got started.
- **Christ saves, not works:** Paul then quotes Deuteronomy 27:26, Habakkuk 2:4, and Leviticus 18:5 to argue that to live under a law based approach to life only brings down a curse on your life because you and no one else will ever measure up to the standard of perfection. Christ took the curse himself and visually displayed that on his death on a tree or a cross. Why? The blessing given to Abraham might come to the nations of the world through Jesus so that by a trust based relationship people may be changed from the inside out through the Spirit. Can it get any clearer than that?
- **Inheritance by promise:** Here Paul basically argues that the promise to Abraham supersedes the Law because it was first and is based in a promise made by God. He goes on to point out that the language of "seed" rather than "seeds" suggests that one person will be the

fulfillment of the promise rather than a group of people (Genesis 12:7, 13:15, 24:7). So to Paul it makes sense that Jesus is that seed (Note Paul may also be drawing connections to the seed of Eve that crushes the serpent's head). He also argues that the law does not displace the promise but was given for another reason.

- Purpose of the law: Paul's train of thought is a bit hard to follow here. Paul is basically saying that the law was given because of sin. The law makes us aware of sin (see the notes on the Ten Commandments) because it serves as a diagnostic tool to show us we are messed up and need grace. Also, we will see that the law was also a tutor or babysitter leading us to Christ. An outside in approach to life (keep the rules, stay in a safe place, managed by strong leaders, held accountable through rewards and punishments) is good for children to keep them safe but this approach will not change them from the inside out. As they mature, a wise parent knows they must focus on an inside out approach to life (values and principles, a sense of identity and security in being loved and capable) so that the child will internalize and own a healthy and loving way to live life. Note: Paul says the law was put into effect by angels. This could also be translated messengers as the Greek word could mean either heavenly messengers or human messengers.
- Heirs through faith: So we see that the law is not an alternate option to attain righteousness but rather its whole purpose was to lead us to Christ. Once we know what doesn't work to change us, we are then ready to learn about what will work to transform our hearts and restore us to true intimacy with God. Yet, once we are restored to God through Jesus and changed from the inside out, the law then has no value or purpose in our life. We don't need it. Paul now goes on to something profound and significant. Men and women both have the complete and full rights of being a child of God (sons received the full blessing and so in that context we, men and women alike, are now all sons). Once we are plunged into Jesus (we are in Jesus) there is no distinction between race (Jew or Gentile), class (slave or free), or gender (male or female). Once we are all in Christ, we are then included in that "seed" of Abraham. We get all the goods of that one promise.
- Adoption as sons: Paul then argues that when a child is very young, it is almost like they are a slave in terms of how carefully they are managed with rules and yet in reality they are heirs to the entire estate. In the same way, Israel in its child developmental stage was given rules that reflect the basic principles of this world (outside in, religious approach to life) but when Jesus came as God's son, he entered into our religion based world to rescue us from religion, from the slavery to rules and an outside in approach to life. Since we are all now fully and completely his children, we now receive his Spirit to change us from the inside out and restore to us true intimacy with God, "Abba father" intimacy. "Abba" means "Dad". So we are no longer slaves to religion but children of a king, heirs to his kingdom.
- Return to legalism: Paul asks why are you going back to things that aren't really God, now that you know God and he knows you (relationship), so that you become enslaved all over again? It is interesting to think about the addictive and entrapping nature of religion. Religion is like a drug that takes us prisoner.

- Paul calls on their love: Paul now appeals to his relationship with them. He calls them to imitate him and to remember their close bond. Paul was apparently ill and had something wrong with his eyes. This is probably why he writes with large letters in Galatians 6:11 and in some letters uses a scribe and just signs a greeting at the end (Colossians 4:18; 2 Thessalonians 3:17). We see Paul use a very maternal image of his parental role in their lives. He describes himself as being in the pains of childbirth with them. Paul is free to use motherly images to describe his care and love for the people he serves. What is the goal of his investment: to see “Christ formed in them”. This is another way Paul tries to help us visualize the internalization of Christ living his life in and through us by the Spirit. We become like Christ on the inside and then begin to live a Christ-like life in our relationships.
- Allegory of Sarah and Hagar: Paul then uses the story of Isaac and Ishmael and of Mount Sinai and the new Jerusalem (the vision of a city of peace) to help his readers grasp the difference between being born miraculously through the Spirit and receiving a full inheritance versus being born naturally and into bondage. Paul quotes Genesis 21:10 to illustrate how the one was sent away and was not able to participate in the full inheritance. This illustration breaks down if pushed too far but the story provided a good mental hook for his readers. He concludes, “It is for freedom Christ has set us free. So don’t screw it up by getting enslaved again to being religious!”
- Circumcision a matter of law: There was pressure being placed on Gentile Christian men to be circumcised by Jewish Christian men. Paul attacks this head on. Paul says if you buy in to one part of the religious system you are putting yourself under all of it. If you want to be righteous according to the law, you have no part of Christ and are outside of grace. Yikes! Paul makes it clear that even though our lives are not all together it is by faith through the Spirit we await the full and total transformation of our lives. We are being changed but we are still works in progress. Even this is an act of trusting God! There is only one thing that counts: Faith expressing itself through love! Paul then warns them about the insidious nature of sin that is like yeast something small that works through the whole bread and then has a big impact. Beware of people who point towards a law-based righteousness because they will subtly infect community with the sin of religion. Paul then pretty much loses it. He says that he wishes that the guys promoting circumcision would just go the whole way and cut their penises off. Hello! Is Paul ticked or what?
- Law fulfilled in love: Our freedom from the law is to give us the mental and emotional space to just focus on serving other people in love. When we are wrapped up in our own self-improvement project, we become self-centered. Now with this said, Paul states clearly that we shouldn’t use this freedom to indulge ourselves.
- Flesh and Spirit: This is some of Paul’s clearest teachings on life in the Spirit. He uses the term “the flesh” to describe our most basic self-centeredness. The flesh for Paul is not your body but a way of operating where we live naturally, respond to our natural cravings, and make our own appetites and desires our top priority. The flesh must die (our self-centeredness) and our body be made alive through the Spirit. The flesh drives us towards

self-centered, self-destructive actions that will prevent us from inheriting God's kingdom into our life and relationships. The "acts of the flesh" (the self-motivated way of living) is contrasted with the "fruit of the Spirit" (the God-motivated way of living). The image of fruit suggests that it is something that comes naturally and without effort (the way the law requires effort). Galatians 5:22 should probably be translated: "The fruit of the Spirit is love: that means joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control." Love is the fruit of the Spirit and what flows from love are all these other ways we respond to God and people. These are heart attitudes that define and shape all that we are and do. When we have this work of the Spirit in our life, we don't need a law because nobody ever comes up with laws to restrict people from being loving, not even God. ☺ The key is to crucify the flesh (by being fully united with Christ in faith and actively choosing to follow Jesus) and to keep in step (moment by moment relationship) with the Spirit. The Spirit is given to us to guide us into truth and that guidance is moment by moment walking through each day together. In this way, rather than getting your marching orders and going out and trying to live the law, God calls us into a daily, dependent friendship.

- **Mutual responsibility:** Here we see the interdependence of personal responsibility and corporate care. Our personal goal should be to carry our own load, test ourselves, ensure we are growing more closely to Christ, and make ourselves available to help those who need our help. Our corporate responsibility is to both offer and receive care and support as it is needed. Paul is outlining how a healthy family operates. One of the things the church has lacked has been the ability to restore people gently after they have messed up.
- **Living by the Spirit:** Here Paul reminds his readers of the sowing and reaping principle. If you invest in the Spirit, you will get rich in the Spirit. If you invest in your own self-centeredness (the flesh) you will fall into spiritual poverty and end up bankrupt. The key thing to remember in sowing and reaping is that it takes time and consistent investment to reap a harvest. You don't see immediate results either way. If you follow the Spirit, it takes time before things work out. If you follow the flesh, it takes time before things go bad. Don't think you are doing the wrong thing because you are following the Spirit and nothing happens right away and don't think you are going to be okay if you do selfish, destructive things and nothing happens. It takes time to reap a harvest. Paul says keep up the good stuff and God will reward you. Bank on it!
- **Neither circumcision nor law:** Paul returns to the key issue of the letter – religious Christians trying to pressure Gentile Christian men to be circumcised. He makes sure they all know this is him writing (I guess forgery could be a problem in those days) and he wants to nail this issue. Religion makes us proud that we reach the outward visible markers, in this case circumcision. (Talk about a weird thing to take pride in!) True relationship takes pride in the other person. Paul's focus is completely on Jesus, all Jesus has done for him in the cross, and how being a follower of Jesus has ended his bond with the world and the approach the world takes (who is in and who is out). All that counts according to Paul is "a new creation" or the "new you" that is the result of the Spirit living in and through you. All that matters is

being changed from the inside out! Nothing else matters. That is what salvation is all about! Paul says, "If you want to follow the rules then follow this one rule: Only care about being changed from the inside out!"

- Benediction: Paul reminds them of his own scars. These are his validation for his ministry. These are his stamp of divine approval. We are reminded that the culmination of the intimacy and union with Christ (see the eight-fold journey to Christ-likeness in Matthew 5:1-11) is persecution. Paul's final words: "The grace (not law) of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers and sisters." May God continue his inside out work in your life through his grace! And all God's people said, "AMEN!"